

The Proper Relationship Between Pastor and Teacher

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by *Edmund Reim*

Judging from the infrequency with which this subject is written and – publicly at least – spoken of in our circles, an innocent observer might naively conclude that the occasion for treating it arose so rarely that the question had no particular value. Anyone, however, who is at all familiar with life as it unfolds itself among us and with the problems that are created by our efforts to do the work of our Lord not only by preaching but also by teaching and doing this last adequately by means of full-time Christian schools, will suspect that there are other reasons why this subject is so carefully avoided and will sense that the present writer, were he to follow his normal inclinations, would be pursuing other lines of thought if an un-feeling editor of the *Bulletin* had not assigned this subject without choice or alternative. No one who has had any experience along these lines can even plan an article on this subject without becoming keenly aware of his own shortcomings. But, since lack of experience would seem even less of a qualification, the responsibility has been accepted, but with the devout hope that the reader will be indulgent and not too critical.

The easiest part of this essay will be to state what the “proper relationship” is which should exist between pastor and teacher. As co-workers in the Kingdom it behooves us to be courteous, considerate, comradely, truly Christian in our relationships toward each other. Or, as has been said better long ago: “Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love, in honor preferring one another.”

Nor is it difficult to show why this should be so. The spiritual welfare of all concerned, of pastors and teachers as well as of church members and school children, demands it. We cannot indulge in strife and wrangling without thereby suffering intense harm to our own souls and at the same time giving most serious offense to the members of our congregations and to the children whom they have entrusted to our care (cf. Luke 17:1-2). Furthermore, the welfare of our schools demands it. They are beset by many dangers and confronted by difficulties on every hand. The opposition within our congregations is often only awaiting a plausible excuse in order to urge a discontinuance of our schools. The Spirit of Indifference is eagerly looking for encouragement. And other dangers threaten from without. Surely, we are giving aid and comfort to the enemy if we permit ourselves to be weakened by internal dissension. We sorely need to present a united front. That is why the relationship existing between us should be as has been indicated above.

But while it is easy enough to say how things should be and why they should be so, it is not so easy to have or to keep them so. True, there are instances where pastor and teacher (or fellow-teachers with each other) seem to “hit it off” instinctively, where the relationship seems to “click” from the first moment of their meeting in the common field of labor. These fortunate exceptions serve only to emphasize, however, that as a general thing human nature with all its attendant evils is only too evident in our relationships. Only from frank recognition of these facts can sound treatment of the problem proceed.

And the cure? It can be stated in single word – love – or its more precise equivalent, the “charity” which Paul so eloquently describes in 1 Corinthians 13.

At this point one starts to hear some impatient mutterings, some signs of disappointment, and the rustle of many *Bulletins* being laid aside or turned to more promising pages. For it is granted that there is nothing new in this suggestion. But can there be anything new? Note how Paul, after having so strikingly described the works of the flesh (Galatians 5), now begins to list their opposite: "The fruit of the Spirit is – love." The trouble lies not with the cure, but with our imperfect understanding of it. In speaking and thinking of Christian love, charity, we usually identify it, unconsciously to be sure, with natural liking and affection. Then we conclude that therefore this holds forth no hope where there is not at least some personal attraction, but rather antipathy and "incompatibility of temperament" between two persons, and where as a result relations are strained almost to the breaking point. We fail to realize that in just such situations true Christian charity shows forth to its best advantage. It will take only a moment's thought to show that there is neither distinction nor virtue in a Christian love which would not function except where there is natural liking, or where the conditions are most favorable: "For it ye love them which love you, what reward have you? Do not even the publicans the same?" The entire last part of Matthew 5, where Jesus speaks of not resisting evil, of turning the other cheek etc., is meaningless if we take it to imply that a Christian will or should enjoy treatment of that kind, or that he will feel no resentment at being so abused. But if from these words we learn to disregard the perfectly natural resentment which such an experience will bring forth, and to overcome the dislike one will involuntarily feel for the author of such troubles, then we have learned to practice true Christian love. And if we, pastors and teachers, learn to master our personal feelings about the many little point of friction which may arise in our mutual contacts, to suppress our irritation at the other's faults, which after all are often only a reflection of our own, and regardless of ruffled personal feelings continue to show each other true courtesy and consideration to offer and to practice cooperation as we know we should and as we would if nothing disturbing had occurred – then we have learned what our Savior meant by these teachings and have at the same time found a trustworthy guide to "proper relationship" with each other, and also a sure cure for the troubles that vex us.

The-suggestion offered is therefore not that we break forth into a sudden burst of emotionalism or that we concern ourselves about outward manifestations of mutual affection reminiscent of the "brothering" and "jolly-good-fellowship" of some lodge convention. It is rather that we practice Christian love in one of its most practical and valuable forms, that of self-examination, self-discipline, and self-control, "an earnest attack upon the old man." It is that "old man" within each of us, that flesh which crops out again and again, which is responsible for the bulk of our troubles. And we can deal effectively with this flesh only as we find it in ourselves, not in someone else. Let us guard against *giving* offense rather than against *being* offended, against *causing* trouble rather than against *being* troubled; our own schools will fare much better and our own lives will be more tranquil for it. The tension in many a strained relationship will be relaxed – and we shall bring about "that he that is of the contrary part," the opposition, to our schools, whatever its source may be, "may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of us."

To one who is of this mind, who will look for the cause of an within himself rather than elsewhere, to such a one suggestions of a practical nature will always be welcome as pointing to possible weak spots which will bear watching. It is in this spirit that the following hints are offered. They are chosen somewhat at random. They by no means cover the field. The selection may not even be particularly happy. But in spite of all these flaws the cautions may still prove suggestive to others and eventually provoke better thought.

First of all, let us forget the old maxim about meeting each other halfway. Our recollections of our struggles with geometry should serve to remind us that this half-way mark needs to be determined with accuracy and exactness. Even to attempt to determine this point in our mutual relations might prove a serious bone of contention, a spark for the tinder. But if from both sides there is a willingness to go far more than half-way, then there is bound to be a meeting somewhere upon the common ground of mutual understanding, and that long before either one has gone the limit. Note, however, that this is something which we can only give, and not demand of each other without thereby again inviting trouble. Here, in the true Pauline sense of the word, charity must begin at home.

Next let us guard against making an issue of position, of rank. Let us remember that in the sight of God we all stand upon the same level of equality, sinners alike, unworthy of the grace that he has shown us. Both he who demands and he who is unwilling to grant equality, both he who demands and he who resents authority – both forget what Paul teaches when he points out that we all are members of one body, of which Christ is the head, and forget as well what our Lord so clearly stated: “Neither be ye called masters, for one is your Master even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.” Here is the place where we should be “in honor preferring one another.” If we imbibe of that spirit, and if each one will try to cultivate it in himself rather than seek it in the other, then the issue would soon cease to exist and each of us could perform the functions that belong to his particular office without spending valuable time and painful thought on the question of first defining and then observing the exact limitations of each one’s rank and authority.

Then let us carefully be on guard against belittling each other’s work, perhaps by drawing an uncalled for and invidious comparison between our own grave responsibilities and duties and the “soft snap” which is enjoyed by the other. This trait, of which both pastors and teachers can be guilty – and often are – is a most rank product of the flesh, a common device of “small” characters who strive to build up their own importance by seeking to create a contrast and thereby to cover their own deficiencies. There is work, worry, and responsibility enough in each of our respective callings to keep us busy with our own affairs. Paul in Romans 12 is very much to the point: “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given us...let us [of the ministry] wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching.” It is true that Paul had different values in mind than those which we connect with the words “ministering” and “teaching,” but the principle applies very forcibly: Let us, one and all, learn to mind our own business and we shall find so much to do, shall find so much opportunity for really growing bigger in our own work, that we shall have no need for looking for contrasts which might make us look more favorable by comparison.

Other dangers loom. Cases of discipline will inevitably arise in both school and congregation, bringing either teacher or pastor, as the case may be, face to face with an unpleasant duty. These provide a fertile field for trouble. The resentment which is often felt by the person under discipline, whether he be child or adult, and which is usually shared by his friends, provides a tempting opportunity: with a little discreet sympathy a pastor may barter for the good will of these who have been offended by the disciplinary measures of his teacher; in a similar manner a teacher may curry favor with those members of a congregation who are smarting under a pastor’s reproof and discipline. There is no point here in raising the question whether the disciplinary measures under discussion are justified or not. There is nothing in this which would justify our resorting to the sordid means described above, which, let us recognize it

clearly, are after all the very method employed long ago by Absalom when he stood by the way of the gate (2 Samuel 15). Let us be loyal to one another. Then, if here have been errors in discipline, we can serve each other best by pointing this out in the proper manner.

There may be problems in congregation and school which can well be discussed between teacher and pastor to their mutual profit and to the benefit of their charges. Such discussion will naturally bring with it an exchange of confidences which we should most carefully respect. Nothing can throw a greater strain upon our mutual relations than to find that such a trust has been betrayed and that confidential matters have been carried to those quarters in the congregation where they do the greatest harm. Naturally this brings to mind the Eighth Commandment. Let us permit ourselves to be reminded that we too violate this without even saying a single word – by giving too willing an ear to remarks being made concerning our co-workers. Our mutual loyalty should be an effective safeguard against this evil also.

Earlier in this essay mention was made of cases where good relations are found to exist between pastors and teachers, and where they seem to result almost by themselves, automatically. If we would look closer we would find that there is nothing automatic about it, but that such conditions are found only where both, pastors and teachers alike, are carefully observing safeguards similar to those suggested above, and are conscientiously practicing such self-criticism, self-examination, self-discipline, and self-control. The lesson is too plain to be missed. True, differences may arise even under such conditions. But then they can be discussed freely and openly, with frankness and mutual respect, with results most beneficial for all concerned.

Such efforts, made in the proper spirit by all concerned, can hardly fail to bring a solution. However, where it would still prove impossible to achieve this end, an alternative can yet be found, one which will at the same time be the practice of Christian charity in its finest form, to “bear with patience each other’s infirmities.” May the grace that has been vouchsafed to every one of us, and the sacredness of our several responsibilities make us ready and willing to conduct ourselves as men who are moved, not by the flesh, but by the Spirit.

This article is, of course, written from a minister’s point of view. It is manifestly impossible for any one to divest himself of the stamp which over twenty years of service have left upon him. Even so, the writer has tried not to forget what was learned by spending almost half of this time in the teaching of a full-time school. But would it not be possible and at the same time advisable, in order to do full justice to the other angle of vision, to have another article on this same subject, this time from the pen or typewriter of one of the teachers? That would not only serve to supplement what is here offered in those parts in which omissions may have occurred, but it would also tend to give better balance to the entire picture.